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SUBJECT: POLITICAL OPPOSITION ROUNDUP: PLAYERS AND  
PROSPECTS IN 2009

REF: A. MOSCOW 388  
[1](#)B. MOSCOW 290  
[1](#)C. MOSCOW 254  
[1](#)D. MOSCOW 201

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Alice Wells for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Political opposition forces in Russia continue to hold little influence and do not pose any challenge to the ruling regime. In 2008, the number of nationally registered political parties in Russia decreased from 14 to 6, with only one liberal democratic party (Yabloko) among them. The democratic opposition in general has almost no national-level support, with only small support in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Communist Party (KPRF) has positioned itself best to benefit politically from the economic crisis, as disaffected voters turn against the ruling United Russia party. This cable enumerates the major registered and unregistered opposition forces in Russia, with attention to their prospects in 2009. End Summary.

#### Significant Changes to the Opposition Landscape in 2008

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[1](#)2. (C) The year 2008 included significant changes for opposition politics in Russia, with the number of registered nationally parties decreasing from 14 to 6 due to their consolidation, dissolution, and transformation. The inconsequential Party of Peace and Unity (a shell essentially comprised of only party head Sazhi Umalatova) merged into the Patriots of Russia, itself a small nationalist party with only limited regional ambitions. The Agrarian Party dissolved itself and joined United Russia, and the Green Party transformed itself into a movement and awaits absorption into Just Russia. The Party of Social Justice merged into Just Russia. Under the weight of multi-million-dollar debts and Kremlin pressure, the Union of Right Forces (SPS) dissolved itself and merged with the Democratic Party and Civil Force to form the new Kremlin-friendly Right Cause. Finally, former prime minister Mikhail Kasyanov's Russian People's Democratic Union (RNDS) lost its registration in December.

[1](#)3. (C) Three Duma parties are opposition parties in principle if not practice: the Communist Party (KPRF), the ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), and the Kremlin-aligned Just Russia. Two other parties enjoy official national registration, the Patriots of Russia and Yabloko, and the new Right Cause party, which was registered to work and compete in 73 (of 88) Russian regions on February [1](#)8.

#### Just Russia: Kremlin-Aligned But Picking Up Protest Votes

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[1](#)4. (C) The Kremlin-backed Just Russia Party, led by Sergey Mironov, holds 38 seats in the State Duma and calls itself a "constructive opposition" party. However, the left-leaning

Just Russia has not opposed any significant policies endorsed by United Russia and instead has attempted to position itself as an alternative to the Communist Party. February 16 media reports stated that Mironov had met with Kremlin Deputy Chief of Staff Vladislav Surkov in what may be an effort to direct voters dissatisfied with United Russia toward Just Russia instead of letting them defect to the Communists.

¶15. (C) Prognosis: Just Russia operates in lockstep with United Russia and enjoys only tepid support among voters. However, a more visible role for the party would indicate increasing government fear about losing votes to the Communists. The addition of new high-profile personalities to Just Russia's leadership or candidate lists would further signal its ascension if United Russia's popularity ebbs amid the economic crisis.

#### Communist Party: Gaining New Life Amid Economic Turmoil

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¶16. (C) The Communist Party of the Russian Federation (KPRF), which holds 57 seats, is the only State Duma party that overtly criticizes the regime, although within limits and almost never on foreign policy. KPRF has protested more visibly as the economic crisis has broadened, including through public speeches lambasting the regime's anti-crisis measures and through nation-wide public rallies on January ¶31. Although long-time KPRF leader Gennadiy Zyuganov has publicly railed for total nationalization of Russia's natural resources, other party leaders have indicated to us a preference for a more social-democratic model that appeals beyond the traditional pensioner-and-veteran demographic into

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younger and more entrepreneurial voters (Ref B).

¶17. (C) Prognosis: The worsening economy likely will benefit the Communists in the form of larger turnout at rallies and higher vote tallies in March regional elections, although party leaders predict widespread electoral fraud will hide the extent of their wins. Regardless, KPRF lacks the State Duma votes to derail legislation and requires government permission to rally legally. KPRF does not yet represent a viable threat to the regime, and the Communists have focused more on broadening their public support than on calling for public support to unseat Medvedev and Putin. The KPRF has failed to develop a social-democratic agenda, and its support base is oriented in an older generation that is passing from the scene.

#### LDPR: Nationalists May Benefit From Economic Crisis

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¶18. (C) The ultra-nationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia (LDPR), helmed by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy, maintains 40 seats in the State Duma and has backed nearly all of United Russia's major domestic and foreign policy initiatives. LDPR, as another controlled opposition party, offers voice to the country's more radical nationalist elements and attracts youthful voters amused by Zhirinovskiy's antics, but the party does not initiate any major legislation and clashes with United Russia only on smaller regional issues (e.g., a recent row in January over electoral registration in Murmansk region).

¶19. (C) Prognosis: Zhirinovskiy remains one of Russia's premier political showmen, but his public support emanates primarily from the public perception of external threats to Russia. For this reason, LDPR's current platform extends little beyond diatribes against the United States, Ukraine, and Georgia. The economic crisis, increased xenophobia, and anti-immigrant sentiment may attract more voters to the party, but it poses no threat to the regime.

#### Right Cause: Leadership Woes, Limited Kremlin Support

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¶10. (C) Leaders of the new Kremlin-friendly Right Cause told us that the pro-business, ostensibly liberal party was the brainchild of President Medvedev, and that it will target educated and entrepreneurial voters, with the goal of garnering between 8-15 percent of the vote in October elections. Those same leaders acknowledged, however, that Right Cause will operate within Kremlin-defined space and will have no formal relations with non-Duma opposition movements. Right Cause continues to suffer from fractured central leadership among its three co-chairs (Leonid Gozman, journalist Georgiy Bovt, and business leader Sergey Titov), and recent difficulties naming a head of its Moscow City branch has exposed limits to the party's Kremlin patronage (Ref D). Right Cause Party submitted registration paperwork on January 21 and reportedly will receive registration on February 18.

¶11. (C) Prognosis: For the regime, Right Cause's biggest success was stamping out the remains of the erstwhile SPS opposition party. Now, Right Cause's troubles are widespread: it has no support outside Moscow and St. Petersburg; its leadership is fractured and suspicious of each other; and it is running on a pro-business platform during an economic crisis. Although fashioned by the regime as a right-leaning counterweight to Just Russia, Right Cause likely will struggle to build public support among liberal democrats who see the party as a Kremlin stooge or among business owners who are suffering from the economic crisis.

#### Solidarity: Kasparov's Latest Doomed Project

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¶12. (C) In December, the Solidarity movement held its inaugural congress to elect its leaders, including Garry Kasparov, Boris Nemtsov, and Vladimir Milov. Described to us by Milov as "Other Russia without the National Bolsheviks," Solidarity is building its membership from disaffected former SPS members, human rights activists, and members of various organizations that constituted Other Russia (including Oborona Youth Movement, Smena, and Kasparov's own United Civil Front). Solidarity's leaders have ensured us that they are capable of attracting thousands of protesters to events, but in their brief existence they have mustered no more than 200 people to any single event (Ref C). Solidarity's leadership structure includes 13 opposition leaders in its Presidium, but Kasparov remains the movement's public face.

¶13. (C) Prognosis: In private meetings, Kasparov has boldly

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but implausibly predicted that Putin will be fired within one year and that mass public rallies will push support for liberal democracy (and, one presumes, for Solidarity). However, the leadership has proven unable to organize Solidarity's platform and its priorities differ depending on which of its 13 leaders we speak with. Without a united voice, the movement likely will flounder into obscurity as did the Kasparov-led Other Russia and National Assembly. Kasparov remains a polarizing figure, whose attacks on the GOR are only outstripped by his diatribes against fellow oppositionists.

#### National Bolshevik Party (NBP): Anarchists With Useful PR

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¶14. (C) The banned NBP, led by radical writer Eduard Limonov, appeals almost entirely to youth eager to participate in anarchic street protests than in political discourse. The Natsbols' modus operandi rarely varies: it advertises its protests beforehand to the media, and at the appointed time youths brandishing NBP flags and bright flares erupt into protest chants. The police carry away the protesters, while eager journalists take photographs. Limonov himself often is arrested, as he was on the January 31 Dissenters' Day protest in Moscow. Other stunts have included the July 2007 takeover

of a room in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the January 2008 takeover of a United Russia office in St. Petersburg.

¶15. (C) Prognosis: NBP holds no political power or ambitions, and the "bolshevik" in its name refers only to its vague desire for anti-establishment revolution. Limonov's ability to attract supporters willing to be clubbed and arrested benefits the opposition little domestically, but the dramatic news photos of police brutality that appear in Western media bolster the NBP's credentials among Russia's liberal democratic opposition. For this reason, no matter how widely they disagree on policy issues, opposition leaders such as Garry Kasparov have been reluctant to fully shed their working relationships with Limonov.

Yabloko: Democrats on Last Legs Financially, Electorally  
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¶16. (C) The last liberal democratic party with official registration, Yabloko has minimal visibility at the national level and, for financial reasons, competes today only in municipal-level elections. A 2008 leadership shakeup replaced party co-founder Grigoriy Yavlinskiy with Sergey Mitrokhin. The party's regional presence has dwindled sharply, so that today, for example, its Volgograd Region branch has only 320 members, down from several thousand five years ago. Facing threats from the government that the party owes up to eight million dollars in debts stemming from the 2007 and 2008 campaigns, Mitrokhin told us Yabloko has shrunk its aspirations simply to staying solvent and keeping its party registration.

¶17. (C) Prognosis: Yabloko would seem a prime target to be dismantled, perhaps under the pretense of party debts as SPS was in 2008. However, with its meager membership rolls and inability to raise funds, Yabloko does not represent a threat to the regime. In fact, the regime can use Yabloko as a symbol that democratic opposition lives in Russia. However, lacking money, national media coverage, or even regional-level electoral ambitions, Yabloko likely will continue to languish in the political wilderness.

Government Restriction of Opposition  
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¶18. (SBU) The regime greatly limits the political opposition and continues to develop new tactics to do so.

-- Exclusion From National Media: Non-Duma parties hostile to the GOR generally are denied access to state-owned national broadcast media or depicted in an unflattering light, and even Duma parties such as the Communists struggle to receive even minimal access.

-- Subversion and Intimidation: Numerous opposition leaders face harassment, which ranges from pranks (such as being doused with paint or having animal feces strewn on vehicles) to violent assaults (such as at Solidarity's January 31 flash mob rally). Opposition groups also face difficulty reserving space for meetings, as Solidarity did for its December Moscow Region congress. On February 6, media reports described how the government had used moles to infiltrate the St. Petersburg branch of Yabloko.

-- Refusal to Allow Assemblies: Opposition groups face enormous obstacles in attempting to receive permits to hold

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rallies. In Moscow, the city government regularly denies democratic opposition group applications, or offers to issue permits for secluded locations. The January 31 Dissenters' Day marked a departure, however, as the Communists and LDPR both received permits, and even the anti-auto tariff TIGR group received permission for its small rally. On February 15, the city allowed a rally in honor of a journalist and a human rights activist who recently were assassinated in

Moscow (Ref A).

-- Onerous Party Registration Process: Parties must gather at least 40,000 signatures in order to receive party registration. To appear on a regional ballot, a party must either pay a significant deposit or gather signatures from a threshold percentage of the region's population. Regional electoral commissions routinely find "irregularities" with submitted signatures, which resulted in Yabloko not appearing on any region's ballot in October 2008.

-- Party Leader Term Limits: President Medvedev proposed in December an undefined limit on how long party leaders could serve. Presumably aimed at the KPRF's Zyuganov and LDPR's Zhirinovskiy, the wording of this proposal has subsequently been refined to not affect these leaders' positions.

Comment

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¶19. (C) The Communists and to a less degree LDPR likely will benefit from the economic crisis as the electorate casts protest votes against United Russia. Still, elections remain a low priority for many Russians, with a January Levada Center poll revealing that only 13 percent consider voting for their officials to be very important (one percent less than in 2004). Party consolidation has made it easier to control political discourse by offering fewer legal options for expressing political opposition. The ruling regime faces no real challenge to its authority at this time. A deteriorating economic situation may lead to some mass rallies, but there is no political party is currently positioned to turn such unrest into a cohesive anti-government force.

BEYRLE